

*American Christian
Responsibility
Toward Africa*

National Council of the Churches of Christ
in the United States of America

This statement was adopted by the Africa Committee of the Division of Foreign Missions, March 1, 1956, and endorsed by the General Board of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, June 6, 1956.

PREAMBLE

This statement attempts to formulate for American Christians and churches the most significant elements of their personal and corporate relationships with Africa south of the Sahara. It is the result of more than a year of study and discussion, in which many able consultants in Africa, Europe and America have shared. It is offered in a spirit of humility and concern, believing that "the churches have this twofold duty, to obey and to proclaim the word of judgment, to repent and to call to repentance. It is their task to challenge the conscience of society, . . . to create and keep open every possible line of communication . . . to alert all their members to the nature and scope of their responsibilities."* Many of Africa's problems are our problems too, and we have not always dealt with them as Christians should. Our consciences are troubled. We must seek to learn from the ways in which our brethren of all races in Africa are meeting these problems, as well as to offer convictions derived from our own history and experience. The Christian Gospel is addressed to all mankind, and we believe that only through a world-wide sharing of insights can any of us grasp the fullness of its message.

**Evanston Speaks*, Report of Section V— Inter-group Relations, p. 55, Second Assembly, World Council of Churches, Evanston, 1954.

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INTRODUCTION

1. From the standpoint of Christian faith all the sores and evils which afflict the social order in Africa — and the world — are largely the fruit of human sin, and not merely of sinfulness in the abstract but of trespasses by men and women, singly and in groups, against their fellows. Some of these evils are the results of obvious sins of selfishness, brutality and passion. Others, no less grave, result from less evident faults of ignorance, stupidity and unconcern — of zeal without knowledge or knowledge without zeal. All of them stem mainly from inability or unwillingness to accept other people into equal fellowship as children of God, objects of His fatherly love, for whom Christ died.

2. But to deny that stature to others negates it for oneself. At the foot of the cross we are all made one, one in the conviction of our own sin, one in seeking and receiving God's gracious mercy, one in rising together into a new relationship of sonship toward God and brotherhood toward all His children. The law of these new relationships is the law of love, love toward God and love of our neighbors. It is true that we are obliged to live our lives among people of whom many do not acknowledge that law. We are not thereby permitted to abate our own observance of it, but rather called to obey it the more sincerely, that our lives may bear witness to our faith.

3. In former times, when communities were generally small and communications poor, the neighborhood was easily defined and the commandment to love our neighbors was not hard to interpret. Today the whole world has become our neighborhood; and we live in an exceedingly complex web of relationships, so that our acts and decisions, especially those in which we share as citizens of a powerful nation, may harm or help people of whose existence we are hardly aware. Hence we must constantly seek to understand these relationships in order that we may judge and act as responsible Christian members of the world community.

AMERICAN RELATIONS WITH AFRICA

4. Even though the United States has no direct political stake in Africa, we cannot as a nation dissociate ourselves from major concern for its peoples. Three hundred years of the slave trade not only transplanted millions of Africa's sons and daughters to America, but also created the myth of Negro inferiority and helped establish in both continents patterns of racial subordination from which we are still struggling to get free. The insatiable demand of our western economy for minerals and other raw materials has drawn millions of Africans into mines and plantations, often under conditions which destroy family life and social cohesion. The West has thrust itself upon Africa; we cannot remain indifferent to the consequences.

5. Some Americans think of Africa chiefly as a bastion of the western world in its struggle against communism. Africans are important to them only in relation to their own security. If they extended aid it would be in the hope of buying friendship. This attitude must be decisively rejected as both sinful and futile. Friendship and solidarity cannot be bought; they must rest not on selfish motives but on the deeper foundations of understanding, personal respect, mutual concern and a sincere desire for social justice. In this setting the sharing of skills and resources is the natural expression of common concern for the good of all. The long-term security not only of America but of the whole world rests on the growth of world community in this deeper sense.

6. More than any other bodies of Americans the members of the Christian churches have given unselfish, brotherly help to Africa in the past. They have established channels of friendship and service, they have become acquainted with Africans as people and with the needs and burdens which they bear. Yet this acquaintance is still fragmentary, and it is imperative that American Christians understand better, care more, and act more vigorously if African needs and hopes are to be met. Most of all Africans today are hungry for recognition and appreciation. America must be ready to receive from Africa as well as to give.

7. Life is all of a piece; all humanity is bound up together; neither segments of life nor branches of the human family can be divided off from the rest for separate treatment. The American Christian is therefore concerned not only with his fellow Christians in Africa but with the whole community and nation; not only with the church

but with the fabric of society which conditions the lives of its members. It is futile for the church to awaken African aspirations unless the way is open for change and betterment. On the other hand programs of technical or political advance are useless unless people grounded in the Christian graces of integrity, brotherly concern and devotion to the public good are at hand to make such projects workable. The provision of responsible leaders must be the primary responsibility of Christians in Africa.

8. We urgently desire to see the end of all political and social patterns which involve the subjection of one racial or cultural group to another. We recognize that the continuance of such patterns in Africa long after other emergent nations have achieved autonomy brings reproach upon the whole Western world. Yet we too are guilty of maintaining racial barriers. Policies and practices rooted in racial discrimination anywhere are increasingly a threat to peace and world order, and a barrier to that self-realization on the part of all peoples to which, as Christians, we are committed. We ought therefore to support every constructive effort both for African advancement and for the elimination of racial barriers in America. But we should be under no illusions that the way will be short or easy.

9. African political development by itself is no panacea, but only one aspect of an exceedingly complex process of change which is actually taking place at varying rates all over the continent. European control has been productive of much good. Stable governments have been established, communications opened, economic resources brought into production, systems of education and public health developed. African peoples have been brought far along the road toward nationhood, and the pace is quickening. This process must go forward, but it is our hope that it may lead to increasing freedom and not to new forms of bondage, whether of Africans to external political or economic power, or of one segment of African society to another.

10. It is imperative that the higher as well as the lower levels of employment be opened to Africans, and that rapidly increasing opportunities be provided for Africans to gain experience in management, in self-government, and in the bearing of responsibilities in every walk of life. Government, industry, commerce and all the activities of African development must be fundamentally educative in character, with ever-increasing African participation, so that a

stage may soon be reached at which race is not a factor in the selection of personnel for responsible posts.

11. We believe that interdependence is a fundamental fact which must be recognized in seeking to satisfy the hunger for freedom and self-realization. African nationalists are apt to forget this no less than their European counterparts. In fact the very term "nationalism" is often pre-empted by a particular ethnic group in support of divisive rather than unifying aims and motives. In most of Africa the well-being of all depends on the growth of a multi-racial society in which all contribute to the strength of a common nationhood. In Africa no less than in America, intransigent resistance to this goal of a united society arouses our deep concern.

ECONOMIC FACTORS

12. In the midst of vast potential resources most Africans remain poor. This poverty is a primary obstacle in their way. African land, though extensive, is generally infertile and often eroded, poorly watered, and badly used. In many areas the inequities of the systems of land tenure are sources of bitterness and tension. We believe that any solution of Africa's poverty must include basic changes in land use and agriculture. Subsistence farming and cattle-grazing for the sake of prestige must give place to commercial farming and grazing, both to increase food supplies and to release labor for more productive pursuits. Changes in land tenure and social organization will necessarily be involved. In particular we would support the principle that land tenure be based on use rather than on status as a member of a particular racial or tribal group.

13. We recognize that agricultural and other occupational changes — which are bound to occur — will have social and cultural ramifications affecting every aspect of African life. We realize that these changes cannot be fully understood by anyone who stands outside the social group affected by them, and that the effects of change only gradually become apparent. The people directly concerned in any project should therefore participate in planning it, and in progressively modifying it in the light of experience. Piecemeal planning by many different agencies, and the imposition of development schemes by external authority are dangerous expedients.

14. African development is bound to require large capital investment and increasing industrialization. As Christians our concern is

that this may result in widespread enjoyment of better conditions of life and higher standards of living; and that the advancement of African peoples in autonomy and self-realization may not be impeded by the ownership of resources and means of production by a particular segment of the population, or by non-African interests. The goal must rather be a healthy climate of economic cooperation in which the human and material resources of all are productively combined to the benefit of all.

15. We believe that immigration of non-Africans should be so controlled as to foster healthy and unified development. The aim should be to augment the corps of technically competent persons in all useful fields, while avoiding the formation of special-interest groups resistant to the development of a united society.

16. We recognize that stability of populations, both urban and rural, is essential to economic and social progress. The migratory labor system is wasteful of man-power, destructive of family life, conducive to vagrancy and crime, unproductive of skill, and basically a form of human exploitation. We believe that dependence upon it will in the long term prove ruinous both economically and socially. We believe that the increase of skill and productivity, both in agriculture and in industry, which is possible only in a stable working community, is essential to better standards of living; and that artificial barriers to skilled employment such as industrial color bars impoverish all classes of society far more than they benefit even the most favored group. The church cannot remain unconcerned with these issues.

SOCIAL FACTORS

17. We believe that the era of rapid world-wide communication, on which we have only recently entered, makes all questions of social, technological and economic change matters of greater mutual concern than ever before. No longer is it possible for tribes in Africa, or peoples anywhere, to remain unaffected by technological changes in the outside world or the impact of foreign investment. No longer can we remain aloof from tensions, frustrations and unrest in Africa that have been induced in part by contacts with our type of civilization. The ways in which closer communications may in the future affect us still more deeply lie beyond our present knowledge, but we must recognize the importance of this trend. It points to the need

for intensified exchanges of personnel, particularly students and technical specialists, so that cultural resources may be shared in both directions, and tensions resulting from lack of acquaintance may be overcome.

18. This fact of growing intercommunication also indicates the trend of social evolution which must be expected and encouraged in Africa. Racial or tribal communities living in isolation from one another are an anachronism. The attempt to preserve them is foredoomed to failure and can lead only to suffering and strife. It is clear that the forces making for a unified society cannot be turned back or past separateness restored.

19. Communalism, the grouping of society into small, self-contained and mutually exclusive segments, whether of caste in India, tribalism in Africa, or religious sectarianism in Western Christendom, belongs to the localized society of the past much more than to the fluid and mobile society of today. We do not expect communal traditions and loyalties to disappear, for they often enshrine a rich and valuable heritage; but we believe they must be reconciled with participation in larger, richer and more vital new communities. This participation should be so rewarding to everyone that the total experience is one of gain rather than loss. Unless this is so tensions will result from nostalgic efforts to turn the clock back to some fancied golden age of the past.

20. We believe that peace, stability and progress will only be assured when race ceases to be a criterion of political, social or economic status. Opportunity for advancement and recognition should be independent of any question of race or ancestral status and should depend on personal character, merit and attainment alone. Interracial acquaintance and fellowship should be encouraged as a first step in overcoming prejudice and arousing mutual esteem.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY

21. American Christians have unequal measures of responsibility with respect to these varied concerns. We have no authority to make political decisions in Africa, however great our influence on their making, nor do we seek such authority. As Christians we must be sensitive to the underlying moral and social issues, must share in the task of exploring and defining them, and must register our concern when they are violated by ourselves or others. All this

requires sincere understanding of the burdens resting on those who do hold the actual power of decision, and of our own fallibility. As Americans we share responsibility for the impact of our national life on that of Africa, and as citizens we must try to see that the policies of our government and of the United Nations support the principles which we hold as Christians. All of this demands watchfulness on our part and responsible use of the democratic processes available to us, including corporate action when necessary. Agencies for such action include the Department of International Affairs of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America and the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs.

22. In areas other than that of politics our responsibility is more direct. The increasing numbers of American Christians who find employment in Africa, and the thousands who go as tourists, exert great influence for good or evil by their lives and conduct. Friendship without condescension and a warm appreciation of people are most wholesome. Those who share their own time and talents by active participation in Christian work often discover new dimensions of fellowship and enrichment.

23. Despite our lapses and failures there are elements of American experience in race relations, in deriving social benefit from technological change, in education for life, and in developing a Christian understanding of social problems, which should be mediated to Africa, especially through visitation and exchange of personnel. Through such exchanges we must also learn how seriously other people are affected by our failures in these realms. American business interests in Africa have a duty to maintain good human relations. American foundations and universities may have increasing opportunities to participate in African educational advance, in community development, in agricultural and technical assistance, and in basic research. All these are forms of sharing through which Christian concern may express itself.

24. But the church itself is still the major channel of effective action. The missionaries sent out by our churches are directly engaged in doing many of the things mentioned above. They are reaching people of all races with the healing and transforming power of the Gospel. They are building schools and teaching in them; they are providing hospitals and ministering to the sick; they are improving agriculture; they are studying African languages and cultures,

opening communications, establishing friendships, mediating the shock of change, serving tribal remnants in the back country, helping townspeople and migrants in the city, and promoting social justice in such matters as wages, housing and welfare. In all this they express our Christian concern with life in its wholeness. In all of it their outreach is steadily multiplied by the training of African leaders and the transfer of responsibility to them.

25. Even more important is the existence of the church in Africa with its own congregational and corporate life, its own ministry, its own growing understanding of the Gospel, its own evangelistic witness and outreach. It is less important that we, outside of Africa, should approach African problems with ethical awareness, than that peoples of all races in Africa should find in their common Christian faith a bond of unity, a brotherhood transcending all differences, and an impulsion to translate the love of God in Jesus Christ into love for each other. To a notable and growing extent all this is already taking place.

THE TASK OF THE CHURCH

26. Yet there are still hindrances to the full effectiveness of the African Church. These we must help overcome. As in America, the church in Africa does not fully realize in practice the brotherhood of the children of God which it professes. The racial patterns of surrounding secular society tend to recur in the churches. The artificially high status of Europeans as contrasted with Africans which prevails in many areas has reinforced real differences of culture and built barriers that are slow to fall. This accentuates the difficulties which everywhere beset the transference of responsibility to indigenous churches. Boards and mission bodies tend to move too slowly in these matters. It is too easy for African nationalists to find grounds for the charge that the church is a foreign body, alien to Africa, because vestiges of foreignness so often remain both in its structure and in the actual control of its affairs. Our brethren in Africa who are striving toward a truer brotherhood in Christ need the assurance that we share their concern and support their efforts.

27. Urgent and heavy tasks are laid upon the church in Africa by the rapid social changes now taking place. The growth of cities challenges the Church to help Africans adapt themselves to new patterns of life. This will require new types of ministerial work and

training. The social breakdown resulting from the migratory labor system confronts the church with major tasks of guidance and reconstruction. The ideal of a multi-racial society must be translated into real community life together. People approaching nationhood require training in Christian citizenship and the responsible use of authority. Nationalism and other movements inflame the people with impatience for rapid change, and exalt materialistic philosophies which negate Christian values. Neither in *leadership*, *resources*, nor *vision* is the African church equipped to meet the task it faces.

28. The dearth of African *leadership* is widely recognized. Too few gifted candidates for the ministry offer themselves because the importance of the church's task is not understood and is not challengingly presented to students. One reason for lack of challenge is the continuing pre-emption of control in many instances by missionaries. Another is the fact that all too often the church is not really coming to grips with basic needs and demonstrating the power of the Gospel to meet them. Still another is the assumption that the ministry in Africa must slavishly follow non-African patterns. Behind the whole matter lies an inadequate provision for ministerial training: too many isolated, small-scale attempts to provide such training to scattered handfuls of students with neither adequate staffs, suitably planned courses, nor recognition of the seriousness of present-day challenges to the faith. Fresh efforts to meet this need are being made. For their success they will demand a whole-hearted will to act together, giving the highest priority to leadership training and to the placing of Africans in posts of major importance.

29. The lack of *resources* stems in part from the habit of treating "church" and "mission" as two distinct things when in the purpose of God they must be one. The churches exist not for self-edification, but to fulfill their calling — their God-given function of proclaiming the Gospel everywhere and winning men and nations to discipleship. A church anywhere which sets its own life above its share in this task of the Church universal is an unfruitful branch. In today's world unmet needs and unresolved tensions such as those of Africa are a danger to everyone; while effort invested there now may yield returns beyond estimation.

30. Resources are lacking at many critical points for another reason: the fact that the present responsibilities of missionary agencies bear little relation to the scale of operations of which each

one is capable. Many missionary societies (especially among those of Great Britain and Continental Europe) are attempting more than they have strength for at the present time because of historical commitments in the past; some American churches are applying relatively large resources in limited fields. The result is an imbalance which should be redressed by a process of sharing, especially by pooling resources to carry forward new tasks together.

31. Finally, the church in Africa — and throughout the world — needs new *vision*, to learn what the will of the Lord is concerning all the tasks it faces. Too often the preoccupations of the churches in Europe and America have been projected overseas without much real attempt to understand what Africans need and want. The proclamation of the Gospel in word and deed has not been wholly relevant to African life. Artificial Western distinctions of sacred versus secular and of personal versus social have broken to bits the wholeness of African conceptions of life and reality. Areas of concern have been marked off as economic and political and left outside the direct concern of religion. Sectarian emphases have brought further division, weakened the witness of the church and opened the way to separatist movements. But God is one, life is one, the Gospel is one, and Jesus Christ the Redeemer is one. Only as the whole church faces its whole task together can the redemptive purpose of God be fulfilled. To do this is the primary task of Christians everywhere.

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